

Both Sides Now by ferggirl

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Summary:

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Nancy wonders a lot if Barb called for her. If her best friend in the whole world had reached for her hand and found nothing there.

(post S1, spoilers for the whole show)

Both Sides Now

Author's Note:

- For [earnmysong](#).

It never really goes back to normal. Sure, her mother and father think it does, and her kid brother seems to bounce back mostly. Steve sticks around and school is school.

But Nancy Wheeler knows she will never be the same.

She has a collection - it's old, from when she was younger than Mike, even. She decided that she wanted a poster with the hands of everyone she cared about on it. In the center are her parents, and tiny Mike. It has her cousins and her old dog and her elementary school teachers. She and Barb had interlaced their fingers, carefully arranging their tracings so it would be clear forever that they were best friends.

She misses Barb. It happens suddenly - she'll come around a corner and see a photo, or a shirt, or a magazine they'd laughed over and her hands will start to shake and she'll burrow into her bed for the day. Her mom says that women sometimes feel things during the change. Nancy doesn't remind her that she's been getting her period for two years now.

The sheriff has been on vacation, or something. Barb is still officially "missing" - but even her parents think she just ran. They send Nancy cards, and ask her to tell them if she hears anything. They still have hope. It's wonderful and awful to see. To know they're wrong.

She tries to talk to Steve about it once. He's been good - better. Attentive and careful and more kind than she ever expected. Nancy knows he's trying.

But when she feels her lip tremble and tries to explain the hole inside herself - the void that Barb left when she disappeared into the Upside Down and never made it home - he freezes up. It's big, emotional stuff and Steve's just... Steve.

She goes out into the woods that afternoon after he goes home. She finds herself back at that tree - the one that took her there, and brought her back again. Her sweater catches on the bark as she slides down to the forest floor, not holding the tears back anymore.

Jonathan had heard her, that night. He'd brought her back because he'd been paying attention, because his hand had wrapped around hers with a grip that said he wasn't losing anyone else.

Nancy wonders a lot if Barb called for her. If her best friend in the whole world had reached for her hand and found nothing there.

She's not sure when she registers the footsteps, but at some point she shoots up, heart racing. The shaggy head and shy smile is a relief.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you."

He's not carrying his camera today, just an extra jacket and a worry line between his eyebrows. Jonathan Byers, the loner, the rebel, the boy who just wants to make everyone pancakes. If only they knew.

"How did you find me?" She wonders for a wild moment if he and Steve are trading her off, talking behind her back about sad Nancy, pretty Nancy, difficult Nancy.

He comes a few steps closer. "Your brother saw you leave. The boys called me. They were worried when it started to get dark."

She looks at the nondescript trees around them. She would ask how he'd known she was here, but his memories of that night are as crystal clear as her own.

"I didn't notice."

The jacket lands in her lap. It's warm and soft and she slides her arms in and tries not to notice how much she likes the feel of his corduroy on her skin. When she looks up again, he's watching her, that line still etched on his forehead.

"Stop it."

He blinks. "Huh?"

“You’re worrying. Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

This get a smile, and she can’t help the rush of triumph even as he shakes his head in amazement. “You’ve got dirt all over your butt, red eyes from crying, and your brother had to tell your mom you and I were studying. Yeah, you’re fine.”

She knows she could be angry. She could lash out, she could hate him for laughing at her. But his eyes are soft, and the hand he puts out to help her up is strong and steady.

So when he tugs her to her feet, she takes the extra step and just wraps her arms around him. He hesitates for a second or two, and again she wonders if he and Steve have a list of rules somewhere. Emotions - Jonathan. Touching - Steve.

Then he hugs her back and for a few seconds the world is as steady as his hands and she doesn’t have to pretend she’s not falling apart.

They stand there in the twilight until she sniffs and straightens to wipe at her eyes with the long cuff of his jacket.

“So what are we studying?”

He watches her fiddle and straighten herself, putting her armor back on. “Biology.”

She nods. “Ugh, there is a test on Friday. Do you have the flashcards I made you?”

Just like that they’re ok. He fishes a flashlight out of his pocket and they walk back to her house, talking about cell division and nuclei. Right before they turn the corner to her house, Nancy reaches for his hand and just squeezes.

He understands. She takes a deep breath and heads up the stairs with a smile. He doesn’t turn for home until the door closes.